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On Stars, Bars, Limos and Losers

Anthology on the Town That Empties Pockets Manages to Fill the Soul

LITERARY LAS VEGAS
The Best Writing About America's Most Fabulous City
Edited by Mike Tronnes
(Henry Holt: $12.95, paperback original; 358 pp.)

Reviewed by Jo-Ann Mapson

Hard to believe, but my last foray into the gambling capital of the West indeed revolved around the literary world when I attended the American Booksellers Convention. Las Vegas, with its wanton abundance of hotel rooms and tempting conventioneer distractions, seems the ideal town for business conventions. However, books and authors seemed an unlikely fit, more a prescription for imminent trouble.

The moment I stepped off the plane, the city began working its alchemy: Those quarters in my pockets cried out to experience the slots. Before long, my educated, intellectual self was transformed into a star-spotting tourist. There's Barbara Kingsolver in the Hilton restaurant! I rode the elevator with Anne Rivers Siddons. Stood in line for hours so John Updike would autograph my freebie paperback of "Rabbit Is Whatever." Watched Amy Tan trot the convention aisles followed by a gaggle of groupies.

Jo-Ann Mapson's most recent novel is "Blue Rodeo" (HarperCollins). Her next novel, "Shadow Ranch," is due out in the spring.

Los Angeles Times photos

The two faces of Las Vegas: The long arm of the law, above, represents normalcy, and the bare arms of a showgirl, below, the city's gaudy flamboyance.

Before the convention's close, I viewed the Mirage volcano, partook of an all-you-can-stuff buffet and lost much travel money in games of chance. This definitely constituted non-literary behavior. So it was with initial reluctance that I picked up Mike Tronnes' "Literary Las Vegas: The Best Writing About America's Most Fabulous City." Prove to me, I challenged the anthology, that a city so successful at emptying pockets has something to fill the heart and soul.

No ordinary compilation, this collection is a bible of Las Vegas riches. Nick Tosches' introduction, "The Holy City," defines Vegas as "a place where Ken and Barbie can go to be bad." It also provides a brief history, from the early days of mob-controlled gambling to "the corporate-run nightmare draped in the cotton candy of family values" now in power.

Contributors' offerings range from Tom Wolfe's' "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby" to Hunter S. Thompson's Rolling Stone piece that made "fear and loathing" household terminology.

And in between are gems. There's Susan Berman's poignant "Memoirs of a Gangster's Daughter": "The sounds of my childhood were the crunching of slot machines, the click of dice, the songs of Sophie Tucker and the Andrews Sisters and the voices of pages at the Flamingo Hotel. . . ." Her tale begins with the funeral for her father—"the greatest gangster that ever lived"—then chronicles her mother's inability to cope with the burgeoning desert town run by the underworld and her eventual descent into mental illness.

Yet no matter how gaudy its origins or contrived its landscape, at its heart, Las Vegas is a town capable of "regular" life. In Western writer Phyllis Barber's "How I Got Cultured," we glimpse a young Mormon girl's dreams of becoming a Las Vegas Rhythmette (a mini-show girl representing wholesome glamour): "me, Phyllis Nelson . . . kicking and dancing in the spotlight of the moon on a hill in the middle of the desert, dancing for the snakes, lizards and cactus blossoms while they stopped and watched."

When Phyllis becomes one of the *chosen*, the rewards are temporary. All this prep work turns out to be nothing more than the age-old ritual of preparing women for men. She gives up her shot at fame, yet the desire permanently marks her perceptions: "You know it's a black ribbon of asphalt rolled out on the desert floor until it passes through a bouquet of brilliant flowering lights. . . . You . . . want to hold it in your nostrils like cigarette smoke. But you know you're walking into a day lily in reverse. . . . When a flower never closes, it isn't a flower. It's only Fremont Street."

It seems clear that while few can pass through Vegas unscathed, the town has a profound effect on literary writers. Inclusion of Britain's A. Alvarez in this anthology takes this fascination to a microscopic level, recounting Horseshoe Casino owner Jack Binion's explanation of the attraction of losing and winning: "I've often thought, if I got really hungry for a good milkshake, how much would I pay for one? People will pay a hundred dollars for a bottle of wine . . . if a guy wants to bet twenty or thirty thousand dollars in a poker game. . . . That's America." We are offered instructions for living life in a depraved Disneyland, adopting a "despiritualized, depersonalized and one-dimensional" path.

In Faith Fancher and William Drummond's "Jim Crow for Black Performers," the transcript of an National Public Radio "All Things Considered" broadcast catalogues the difficulties under which black performers, eager to play the early Vegas stages and take in the sums white performers were getting, labored to maintain human dignity. In an era when America civil rights were gearing up for major change, such greats as Count Basie, Louis Armstrong and Pearl Bailey were good enough for white gamblers to listen to but unwelcome at hotels. When Lena Horne refused to bow under, she was allotted a cabana—and housekeeping was instructed to burn her bed linen daily.

Readers will be pleasantly surprised at the depth and vision of "Literary Las Vegas." There's more here than a tour through the Liberace museum, but the importance of his flamboyance is not ignored. Albert Goldman's "Elvis: Revival at Las Vegas" reveals the meticulous planning the King put into his routines; J. Randall Prior's "Casino Queen" offers erstwhile-homemaker Patsy Lane's casino-breaking secrets.

Richard Meltzer's "Who'll Stop the Wayne" explains why there never is anything on television in the hotels (except gambling incentives) and cautions against seeking out CNN. Joan Didion's "Marrying Absurd" essay on quickie weddings seems as apropos today as it did in 1967, when it first appeared in the Saturday Evening Post. "Melvin and Howard: a Nevada Fairy Tale" suggests that in the land of the large, gamblers so need to believe that the big win is within human reach that they are almost willing to overlook gaping holes in logic.

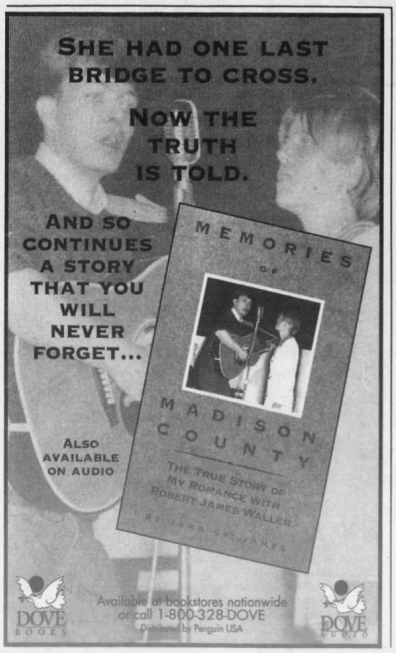
A photograph accompanies each essay, a historical bookmark. The organization is thoughtful and precise: Begin with classics and you sow seeds that germinate into fear and loathing and blow in the wind toward a blossoming neon future.

The book's final offering, Marc Cooper's "Searching for Sin City and Finding Disney in the Desert," follows the author and his indefatigable literary agent as they alternately take the tour and are taken by it. What a pair of visionaries these two make. The volcano at the Mirage "makes me nostalgic for my childhood. . . . It looks just like Elizabeth, New Jersey." When the dealer rakes in the last chip "all pretense and sentimentality out the window. You are out of money? OK—get lost."

Their Vegas epiphany is that all this Luxor/MGM froufrou is "Joe Camel" philosophy contrived to reel in the next generation of gamblers. Of particular enjoyment—and possible future Vegas agenda—is taking solace at the Survival Store, where they rent Uzis and unload their frustrations on an anonymous paper target. The accompanying symbolism as Cooper's left eye bursts a blood vessel, requiring him to don an eye patch, provides a nice touch.

Mike Tronnes has amassed an anthology of fine writing on stars, bars, limos and losers, ordinary folk who enter into the Nevada Oz hoping a run of luck will elevate their lives. To ask literary writers to pen their musings on this city is to link us all on a common chain.

As poet Diane Wakoski says in her recent collection of poems, "The Emerald City of Las Vegas" (Black Sparrow Press): "Las Vegas/like the Emerald City,/is for adults; we are the ones/who know how to live on a desert and pretend/it is a palace." It can't be put any more simply or said any more eloquently. In the presence of such style, once again I find myself star-struck. ■



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